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News from the Land of Cedars

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STRIKING BACK

THE LEBANESE General Union of Workers called a strike and demonstration for February 29th. Their claim was for increased wages to keep up with inflation, more freedom of expression and an end to bans on demonstrations. On February 27th the government and army declared a curfew for the 28th and 29th.

There was no demonstration but the strike took place all over the country. This is the first time we have seen a curfew used to stop a demonstration. The government is afraid of workers' anger, the minimum salary is \$150 but the cost of living is as high as in Europe. The government's 'justification' for the ban is the conflict with Israel!

Lebanon is a land of unrestrained capitalism, with a government in favour of economic liberalism and privatisation - this in a country with little electricity, few telephones, and little clean drinking water. The wages of the most impoverished continue to fall, while the rich avoid paying their taxes, and what money there is the government spends on luxuries for its ministers.

THE OPPOSITION - AGAINST WHO AND WHAT

There is little to say about the Lebanese left - much of it is identical to the petit-bourgeois parties, more interested in getting a bigger slice of the cake than with real change. Its members actually support the liberal economic policies of the government - it is strange to sometimes hear the old Maoists quoting Marx to justify their 'provisional return' to capitalism.

THE NEW LEFT

Following the repression of the July demonstrations, the radical communist left is starting to regroup. It is made up of many political strands, but it is noticeable that even the nationalists are becoming more influenced by libertarianism, even anarcho-syndicalism. There is, then, a glimmer of hope, providing everyone learns the bitter lessons of experience. If we can work together in our areas of agreement, we may be able to regain the good years of 1970-75, before the war overtook the radical left.

In conclusion, the Lebanese left will have no chance to progress if it is not open to all who agree with certain fundamental criteria: combating the Israeli occupation, fighting for secularisation, collectivisation of vital sectors (health, education...), the safeguarding of public liberties, equality between women and men, openness to the 'advanced west', openness to agreement on the left...

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Last year the Workers Solidarity Movement took part in an international libertarian meeting in Spain. The following article is based on a report from Basina Bassan, a Lebanese anarchist, which originally appeared in the French journal *Alternative Libertaire*.

"The second Lebanese Republic faces serious problems. Although the war was ended by the 1989 Taef agreements, the underlying cause of the war - the religious divide - has not really been addressed, and so the situation remains explosive. For example, although the Taef agreements required that civil service recruitment must ignore religious denomination, we still find near-perfect segregation between, and within departments. This mirrors the division of the higher political functionaries - President of the Republic, President of the National Assembly, etc. - into Christian positions and Moslem positions. What is worse is that you cannot choose to remain beyond this division - if you want to marry, for example, you must have a religious service for it to be legally recognised. You can be an atheist only in your thoughts, no more...

SOCIAL SITUATION

The situation is charged by the continuing presence of Syrian and Israeli troops. What's more, civil liberties are coming under increased attack. In July of last year, the General Union of Workers (an umbrella organisation similar to ICTU) decided to organise a general strike to protest against the 40% increase in the price of petrol. The government replied with a ban on demonstrations, and called in the army to enforce it. The Lebanese unions did not retreat, and held a huge demonstration in August to force the government to rethink their position. Even this, though, falls far short of the changes that are needed.